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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Bureau of Agricultural Economics

RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS
IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

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Lincoln, Nebraska
April 1944

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Extensive contact with rural people in this area provides orientation in some phases of the characteristic structure and functioning of rural groups. This background is admittedly sketchy because it represents limited experiential participation and observation. Specifically, the present generalizations are based upon experience in working on community organization with farm people and professional agricultural workers in widely scattered counties in the area. These counties are distributed in sharply different type-of-farming areas however, and are sufficiently numerous to provide a basis for a few broad tentative conclusions. These can only be tested and interpreted by more intensive investigation. Observation in five or six well-selected sample counties would furnish invaluable background information for such interpretation, provided broad observation of the counties is supplemented with more intensive study of one or more communities in each sample county.

Communities and Neighborhoods in the Great Plains

An examination of the Great Plains impresses the observer with the sparsity of the population. The average density in more than half of this vast region is only 6 persons per square mile, even when city populations are included, and in large areas it drops to less than one per square mile. Large cities do not exist in the Plains. Human habitations make a thin pattern of inconspicuous dots on the vast panorama of hill, valley, and plain. These dots are distributed irregularly over the region with numerous nuclei of varying sizes from 100 persons or less to 300,000. Only 4 cities in the entire region have 100,000 or more population. Fifty-seven cities had over 10,000 population in 1940, and 123 had between 2,500 and 10,000. Three out of 5 of these dots represent persons living on farm or ranch, or in a rural town of less than 2,500 population. Thus most families in the region are part of a rural community and 3 out of 5 families in these rural communities live in the open country. Farm and ranch families, living in scattered farmsteads, make up much of the rural community in the Plains. They are grouped by relative proximity and association, into rural neighborhoods of varying size and density, and of varying degrees of social solidarity.

Rural people in the Plains function within their communities according to a democratic pattern based upon their needs and aspirations. Organizations, informal association, mutual aid, cooperation, and competition all have a part in the social pattern. Any study of neighborhoods and communities involves (1) the problem of the delineation of the community area, (2) an inquiry into the character of the integration of the community, (3) the problem of identification of the component neighborhood groups, and (4) an inquiry into the quality of the solidarity in the individual neighborhood groups.

1/ The Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming (about one-fifth of the area of the United States.)

A complex pattern of loyalties, expressed in social, economic, educational, religious, fraternal, and business relationships, makes up the context of individual and group behavior. Because of the intricacy of the behavior pattern it is difficult to obtain a clear-cut picture of natural groups, but a practical working knowledge can usually be achieved with less technical procedure. A few broad generalizations regarding the "neighborhood" and the "community" in the Northern Great Plains may be outlined.

- (1) Farm people, generally, are aware of neighborhoods and communities as such, and function informally within them. Rural families seldom live in solitude, and the typical farm family in the Great Plains is part of a neighborhood including 5 to 50 families. These natural neighborhood groupings are not the result of formal rulings or decisions, but grow out of circumstances and free association. The people know each other; they exchange work; they borrow and lend tools and equipment; they visit back and forth.

It has sometimes been assumed that automobiles and modern communications have destroyed that which we think of as neighborhood life, and that "special interest" groups have superseded neighborhood groups. The influence of such factors is not questioned but, other things being equal, close proximity of farmsteads does help to intensify spontaneous primary contacts and relationships which give cohesion to the neighborhood group.

The typical Great Plains community includes 3 to 7 neighborhoods -- with a common trading center, churches, schools, or other institutions. Close associations like those in the typical neighborhood are not so common in the community but the people living in a given community area have some things in common. Local people frequently use the concepts, neighborhood and community interchangeably. It is difficult indeed to so define these two concepts as to show a clear-cut distinction between them and to indicate whether a given area is a neighborhood or a community. The cases, however, are relatively few that do not lend themselves to a common sense classification after facts about the areas have been obtained. The same people obviously have a functional relationship to and are a part of both the neighborhood and the community. One group is composed of their immediate neighbors and the other of several neighborhood groups having a common attachment to a given community center.

- (2) Maps showing merely the location of the farmsteads in a county are of little value when it comes to identifying the actual neighborhoods. When driving along a country road one can see the physical features such as hills, valleys, streams, highways, farm buildings, and fences -- but the habits of association and the neighborhood relationships are not apparent. These are as real in the minds of the people as the physical features of the land. They represent the actual functioning of rural society. True, there is often close

relationship between the physical features of the land and the association pattern. Ridges, gullies, canyons, unbridged streams, and highways, obviously influence the contacts of rural people. For example, in a county traversed by several parallel canyons the neighborhood and community map shows the unmistakable influence of the terrain. The same thing has often been noted about streams, hills, and highways. These physical features are a framework within which cultural, institutional, and associational factors operate to establish the group pattern.

- (3) Professional workers do not always think in terms of neighborhoods and communities. A discussion with the farm people regarding their neighborhoods has frequently satisfied the most skeptical. This is possible only if the questioner is objective and refrains from making theoretical or abstract statements that confuse the people.

- (4) Natural neighborhoods have been somewhat obscured in the minds of leaders and local people because activities of many special-interest groups, governmental agencies, and local units of government cut across natural neighborhood lines. Boundaries of rural school districts were often established without reference to natural neighborhoods. Organizations and agencies that serve farm people have often overlooked the actual existing neighborhoods and have superimposed on the natural pattern of neighborhoods a rigid township, precinct, or block organization. This sometimes cuts directly through natural groups and often ignores the associational habits and sentiments of the neighborhood.

Professional agricultural workers have sometimes been impatient with the farmer for so slowly and reluctantly adopting scientific contour farming on the rolling and hilly land in this part of the country. He persists in plowing in straight lines up and down hill. But those who assist farmers with the organization of programs often insist on following the straight lines of the rectangular survey because it looks easier. Results of such organization are frequently disappointing because it ignores the established patterns of group association.

- (5) Neighborhoods have functioned mainly without community coordination and without specific reference to general problems. Organizational machinery is lacking in most communities for the orderly and efficient promotion of community work. The result is waste of effort on the one hand, and incomplete community participation of the people on the other.
- (6) Neighborhood leadership has not been mobilized behind broad community or national objectives. Leadership is one of the vital resources of the rural community. Social groups are found within natural neighborhoods and in this area personalities are often as important as issues in deciding the immediate course of action. It is not uncommon for professional workers when promoting an important enterprise to hear such questions as, "What does George think of this?", or "Have you talked

with Bill about it?" This suggests that the local leader functions in the decisions of the neighborhood group. Many of the neighborhood groups are informal, with the strongest leaders at times holding no office. The mobilization of such local leadership is essential to full participation of farm people in community efforts and programs.

- (7) Development of transportation and highways in rural areas has given increasing importance to the community, but this change has been gradual and it has not done away with neighborhoods. The community does not displace the neighborhood. Some confuse this relationship of farm people to the community service center with the personal face-to-face relationship of neighbors who are associated together in daily life. Many communities are lacking in adequate integration of rural neighborhoods into the larger rural community of farm and nonfarm people. Such coordination does not subtract from the significance of face-to-face neighborhood relationships but gives meaning and direction to them.
- (8) Neighborhood relationships are based upon a variety of cultural, institutional, and physical factors. This variation often appears within small areas, like counties. The predominant pattern in the eastern States of this region, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, is cultural. Nationality, church affiliation, and other cultural factors, along with geographical and other physical factors determine the neighborhood association. The general pattern in the western States -- Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado -- is largely geographical and agricultural with a scattering of cultural and institutional groups. There are many exceptions in both broad areas as in the sandhills in Nebraska. Moreover, the two "zones" blend into each other.

The history of settlement apparently has a part in this broad difference between the eastern and western States of the region. More of the eastern settlement was by foreign-born people whereas toward the west the settlement was more often by immigrants from other States -- second-, or third-generation families. These families ordinarily did not settle in groups but infiltrated into groups from other localities. Geographical and agricultural differences had their part. In the western States, for example, the streams and other physical features more nearly determined the distribution of the families. Furthermore, sharp variations in type of agriculture in these States often differentiate neighborhoods within geographical limitations. Problems and interests of the intensive-farming area of the valley lands differ from those of the extensive farming and ranch area. These effect the grouping of families into different neighborhoods.

- (9) It has sometimes been assumed that neighborhoods do not exist in sparsely settled areas of the Great Plains. Statistical data regarding

population and land area alone are useless in judging the relative social proximity of rural people. It is quite misleading to divide the farm population by the square miles and assume extreme isolation in a whole county. In some sparsely populated areas it has been estimated that 90 percent of the ranch families are not too remote for the purposes of social interaction. The typical neighborhood in these areas is a small group of 5 to 10 families somewhat removed from other similar groups. Distribution in space usually demarcates the neighborhood in such areas, rather than civil subdivisions, or cultural factors such as religion, nationality, etc. Moreover, it should be remembered that distance is relative, and that physical isolation does not present the obstacle to association that may be supposed. Modern transportation and the folkways of the west largely nullify the factor of distance. It was not uncommon before gas rationing for a ranch family in Montana to get into the station wagon after supper and run over to the neighbors 35 or 40 miles away, as an eastern Nebraska farmer would go across the road or visit a neighbor a half-mile distant. In fact, it might have been done more often just because it could be done in an automobile.

- (10) Communities in the Plains are not completely self-contained. Modern transportation and highways have increased competition between towns, and wide marginal areas may divide their "business" between two or more trade and service centers. Moreover, a hierarchal relationship obtains between community centers of different size, such as the village, the town, and the city. The town may serve an area including several villages, and the city may in turn serve an area including several towns. For practical purposes it may be assumed that a given community includes the area in which a majority of the families go to the same community center. This is a common-sense basis for community planning and organization in the Plains, as it indicates in a broad way the direction of community relationships.

Although the foregoing generalizations are believed to represent the characteristic orientation of rural people in the Northern Great Plains, a number of important details are lacking in this statement. These conclusions are based upon first-hand information from a large number of farm people in many different counties. Professional agricultural workers in the counties have also helped with the interpretation of association patterns, and an attempt has been made to generalize objectively from this experience as a whole. The generalizations are tentative conclusions and represent different degrees of certitude. They show in broad outline how rural people in the Plains function socially in groups larger than the family. The influence of modern transportation and highways and of the progressive urbanization of rural life has been considerable. Communities and neighborhoods have everywhere changed greatly during the last quarter century. This change is still in progress. The social effects of these factors have been somewhat stabilized and it is not expected that rural social groupings in the Great Plains will change as much in the next 25 years as they have the last 25. It has been possible to get substantial unanimity regarding

present neighborhood and community areas, indicating that the group patterns do exist and that they do have significance for rural people generally. Several questions are suggested by the orientation of some rural people and local leaders who have participated in community organization work. These merit further discussion and analysis.

Communities:

How has the typical rural community structure changed as a result of modern transportation and urbanization?

Have county-seat and other larger towns usurped certain functions of rural villages? How have rural town-centered communities been affected by competition of nearby cities? How does typical community structure vary within the Plains?

Does real community integration of a group of rural neighborhoods around an open-country hall or schoolhouse sometimes occur in the sparsely settled areas of the Plains?

Neighborhoods:

How has typical neighborhood structure changed as a result of modern transportation and urbanization?

How has economic stratification affected groupings? Have rural church neighborhoods been secularized? Are nationality groupings losing their identity as groups as the foreign-born settlers die? Have geographical neighborhoods disintegrated, formed smaller groups, combined, or shifted? Are new factors becoming dominant in neighborhood association? If so, what is the modern counterpart of the earlier neighborhood life?

Where do cultural-institutional patterns predominate in the Northern Great Plains? Where do geographical patterns predominate? Can the dominant patterns be mapped and described by sub-areas?

The above questions indicate some of the broader areas of uncertainty and suggest observations and study which should perhaps guide research and service activities in community organization in the Northern Great Plains. Such addition to general knowledge regarding community and neighborhood structure would supplement the results of intensive research in limited areas.

Examples of Community and Neighborhood Mapping
in the Northern Great Plains

To assist in visualizing the typical community and neighborhood area pattern, actual maps developed in different localities are included. These have been selected from a large number of maps prepared in cooperation with local people in different types of areas. Buffalo County, Nebr. (fig. 1) is a highly diverse area, including the intensive Platte River valley lands, dry farming, and limited ranching areas. The names of local neighborhoods are indicated to show the institutional and cultural basis of many neighborhood groups, which is characteristic of much of Nebraska, Kansas, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The sparsely settled sandhills area of Nebraska is represented by an area map of Grant, Hooker, and Thomas Counties, and the south half of Cherry County (fig. 2). In terms of number of families, most of the neighborhoods in these sandhill counties are much smaller than are those in the more intensive area. Community areas in these counties are large in terms of square miles. Yellowstone County, Mont. (fig. 3) contains extensive areas of range lands, and intensive agricultural areas in the Yellowstone River valley which runs in a northeasterly direction through the county. Population is relatively dense in the valley, but in the rest of the county settlement is scattered. The map of Hamilton County, Kans. (fig. 4) is included to show the settlement pattern in sparsely settled areas. Hatched areas are extensive grasslands which separate the neighborhood settlements in the livestock and wheat ranch country. The entire county is a single community with the county-seat town as the trade and service center.

The delineation of communities and neighborhoods in Buffalo County, Nebr. was done with the assistance of 35 farmers selected by the Extension Agent. The first step was to divide the county into 35 survey areas, small enough so that the selected cooperator would know all the families living in the area. Lists of farm operators with legal description of their farmsteads were prepared, by survey areas. These lists were derived from a rural directory and other local sources. List-forms with columns for religious affiliation, nationality, and trade centers, were used for these lists of farm operators. Cooperators were asked to furnish this information for the individual farm families, and one-inch-scale base maps of the county were then used in spotting the families. These maps showed roads, streams, villages, towns, schools, churches, rural dwellings, and other landmarks, and they were used as follows:

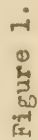
A county map of trade areas was first prepared, with converging lines running from individual farmsteads to trade centers where most trading is done. This map was then generalized to show where most of the families trade most often.

A map of church affiliation was similarly prepared with lines from farmsteads to rural or town churches where families attend church, and generalized to show predominant church-attendance areas.

Nationality was shown on another map by the initial of the nationality of each family, indicating the concentrations of nationality groups.

From these association-factor maps, from information about known community and service centers, and from school-district maps, a tentative community and

Legend	Communities	Neighborhoods	Townships
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Scale: 1 inch = 4.5 miles

COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS IN GRANT, HOOKER, THOMAS, AND SOUTH CHERRY COUNTIES

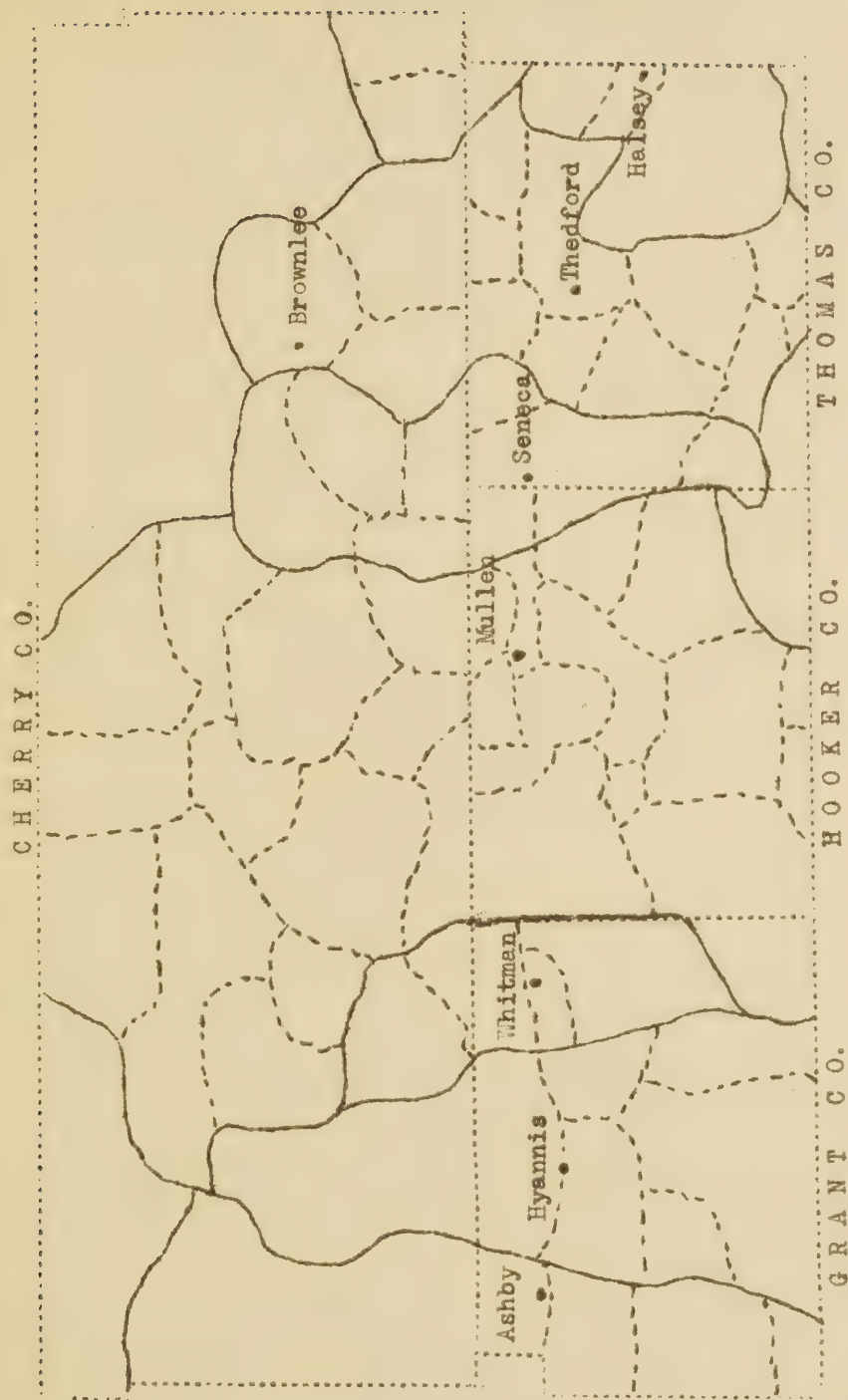


Figure 2.

Boundaries

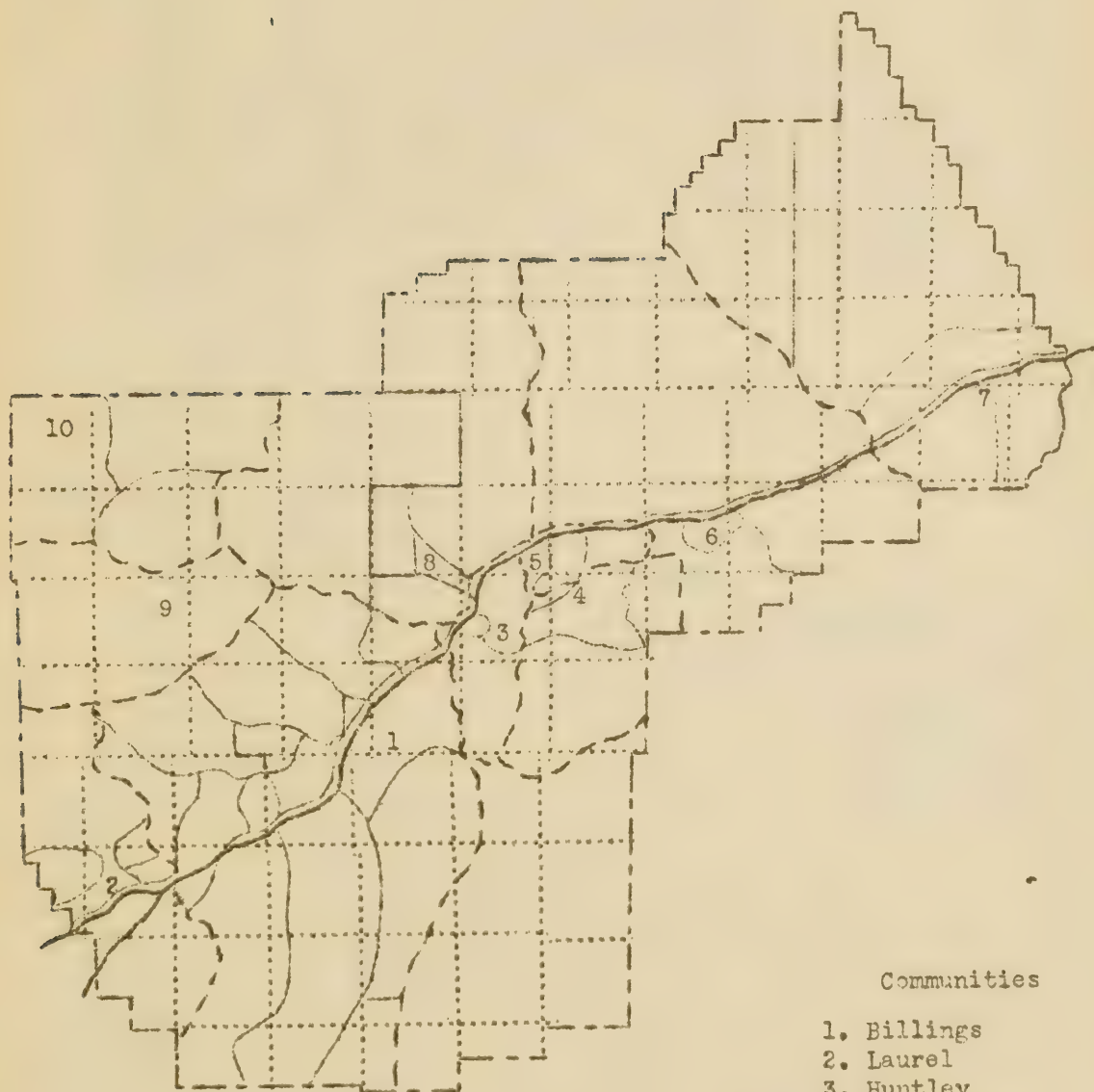
----- County

—— Community

- - - - Neighborhood

Scale: 1 inch = 12.7 miles

COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS
IN YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA.



Scale: 1 inch = 12 miles

Boundaries

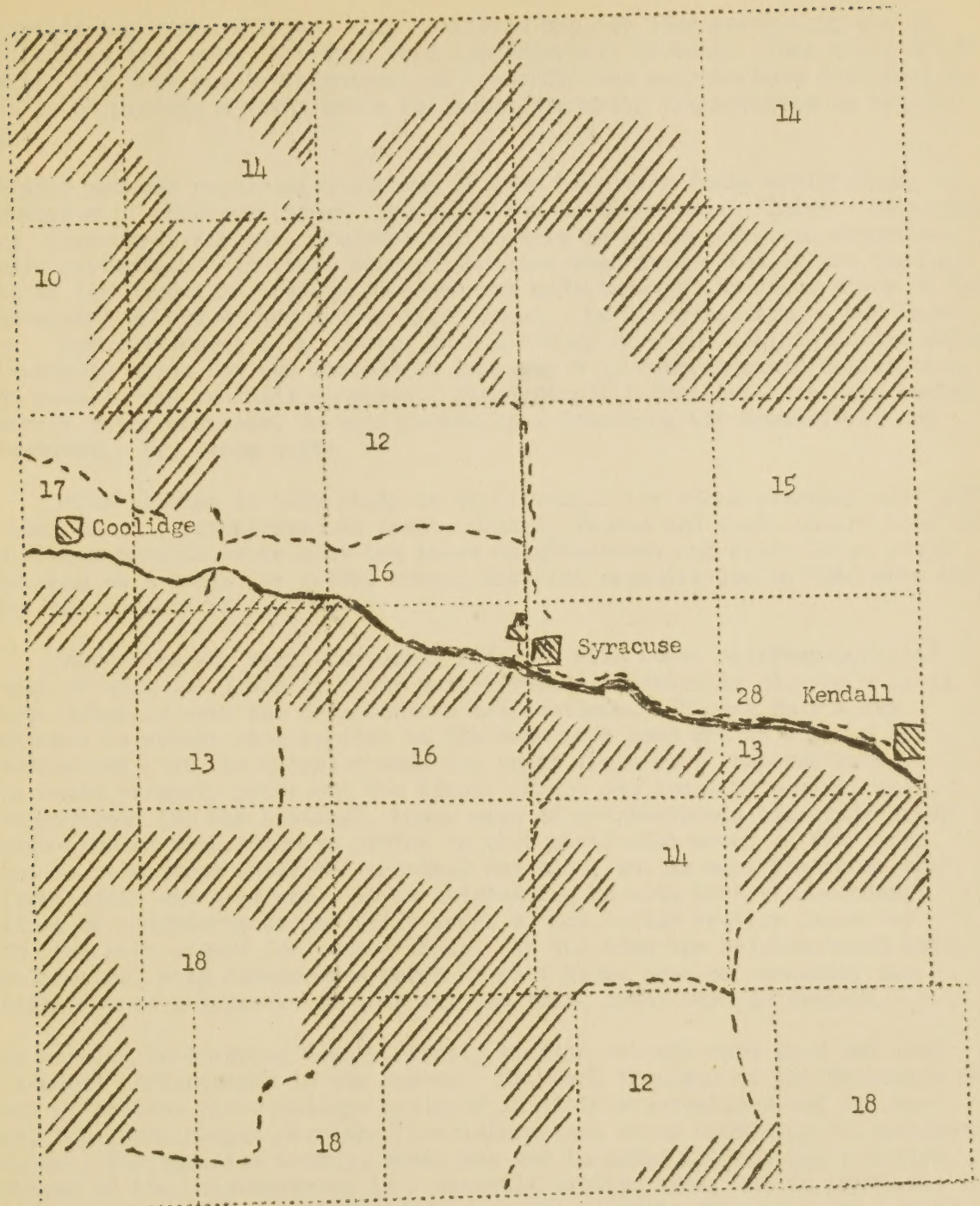
- County
- River
- Community
- Neighborhood
- Township


Communities


- 1. Billings
- 2. Laurel
- 3. Huntley
- 4. Ballantine
- 5. Wordon
- 6. Pompey's Pillar
- 7. Custer
- 8. Shepherd
- 9. Acton
- 10. Broadview

Figure 3.

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NEIGHBORHOODS IN THE SYRACUSE
COMMUNITY, HAMILTON COUNTY, KANSAS



 Grassland areas without farmsteads

 Settled areas

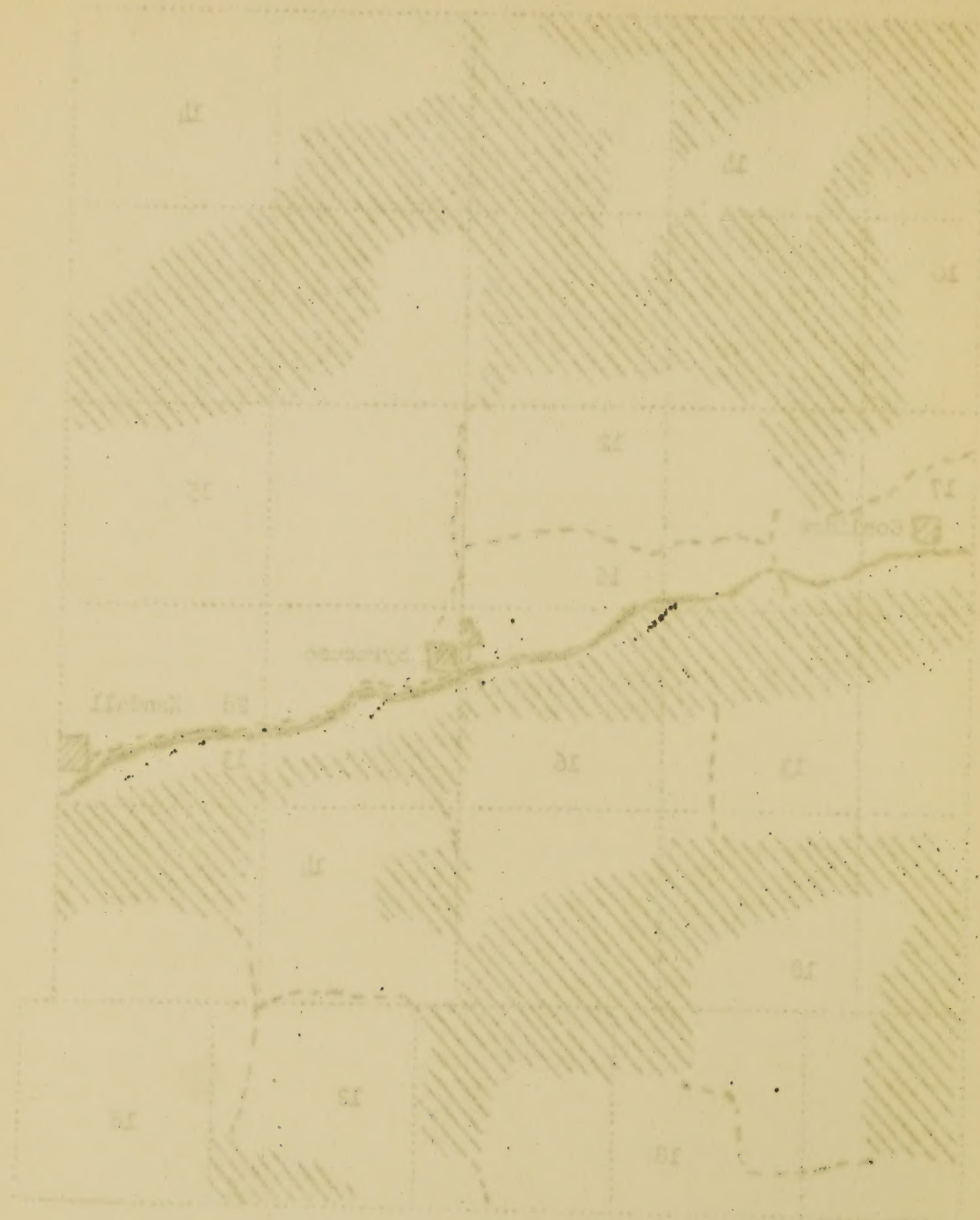
Numbers indicate families

--- Neighborhood boundary

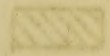
Scale: 1 inch = 5 miles

Figure 4.

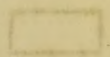
MISSOURI RIVER
COUNTY, MISSOURI COUNTY, KANSAS



Shaded areas without landmarks



Section lines



Section lines indicate location
Neighboring boundary

Figure 1.

Scale: 1 inch = 2 miles

neighborhood map was developed. The completed map was then checked by the 35 cooperators to make sure that they were approximately correct. This was a study to develop and test simple techniques of community and neighborhood delineation, as well as to provide a sound basis for rural community organization in Buffalo County.

Simple methods requiring a minimum of time have been found satisfactory in many counties of different types throughout the Northern Great Plains. Community leaders, farm organizations, professional workers in agriculture, in education, etc. have participated in these surveys and have been interested in the results. The map of the sandhills area in Nebraska was made through the cooperation of the Superintendent of the Hooker County High School, the Extension Agent, and local leaders. Superintendent L. A. Bragg, in his "Study of Local Administrative Units and Attendance Areas for the Schools of Nebraska," 1/ describes the delineation methods used in the sandhill counties. These simple techniques have been tested in numerous other counties, in satisfactorily delineating the communities and neighborhoods. Mr. Bragg says:

"The problem in this study is to determine the rural neighborhoods and trade areas (communities) in Grant, Hooker, Thomas and south Cherry Counties. A second problem is to show how these neighborhoods and trade areas could be used as a basis for future school district organization in this area and for the schools of Nebraska.

"Ranchers who were thoroughly familiar with these neighborhoods and most of whom had lived in their neighborhoods practically all their lives were asked to make the neighborhood delineations. It took only a few minutes to orient each rancher to the base maps used and as soon as he understood that the neighborhoods and trade areas were what was wanted, he would promptly point out the lines. Where one locality was not well represented (at the meeting), these maps of neighborhoods and trade areas were checked with ranchers living in that particular area. A few lines had to be altered where this recheck was made, but in most instances the first draft was accurate. It is interesting to note that the boundary lines of neighborhoods and trade areas do not follow section lines nor do they have regard for county lines. At the time the neighborhoods were delineated, each rancher was asked to what trade area or community his neighborhood belonged. In this way the trade areas were determined."

In mapping Yellowstone County, Mont., similar methods were used and many local leaders participated in the survey. Dr. Carl Kraenzel of the Economics Department of Montana State College assisted in field observations and as consultant, but local people furnished the information about community and neighborhood areas. The Hamilton County, Kans. map was included to show the relative compactness of the neighborhoods in a sparsely settled area, and to emphasize the fact that population cannot be divided by square miles to determine the actual distance between farm families. This map was made by the Extension Agent and local people, in connection with the setting up of an organization of neighborhood leaders in 1942. The figures in the unhatched portion of the map indicate the number of open-country families in each neighborhood area.

1/ From an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Colorado State College, Greeley, Colo

neighbourhood map was developed. The completed map was then checked by the 15 cooperators to make sure that they were approximately correct. This was a study to develop and test simple techniques of community and neighbourhood delineation, as well as to provide a sound basis for rural community organization in Butte County.

Simple methods requiring a minimum of time have been found satisfactory in many counties of different types throughout the Northern Great Plains. Community leaders, farm organizations, professional workers in education, etc., have participated in these surveys and have been interested in the results. The map of the sandhills area in Nebraska was made through the cooperation of the Superintendent of the Hooker County High School, the Extension Agent, and local leaders. Superintendent L. A. Bragg, in his "Study of Local Administrative Units and Attendance Areas for the Schools of Nebraska," describes the delineation methods used in the sandhills counties. These simple techniques have been tested in numerous other counties, in satisfactorily delineating the communities and neighbourhoods. Mr. Bragg says:

"The problem in this study is to determine the rural neighbourhoods and trade areas (communities) in Grant, Hooker, Thomas and south Cherry Counties. A second problem is to show how these neighbourhoods and trade areas could be used as a basis for future school district organization in this area and for the schools of Nebraska.

"Ranchmen who were thoroughly familiar with these neighbourhoods and most of whom had lived in their neighbourhoods practically all their lives were asked to make two neighbourhood delineations. It took only a few minutes to orient each rancher to the base maps used and as soon as he understood that the neighbourhoods and trade areas were what was wanted, he would promptly point out the lines. Where one locality was not well represented (at the meeting), these maps of neighbourhoods and trade areas were checked with ranchmen living in that particular area. A few lines had to be altered where this ranchman was right, but in most instances the first draft was accurate. It is interesting to note that the boundary lines of neighbourhoods and trade areas do not follow section lines nor do they have regard for county lines. At the time the neighbourhoods were delineated, each rancher was asked to state what trade area or community his neighbourhood belonged to. In this way the trade areas were determined."

In mapping Yellowstone County, Mont., similar methods were used and many local leaders participated in the survey. Dr. Carl H. Hurlbert of the Economics Department of Montana State College assisted in field observations and as consultant, but local people furnished the information about community and neighbourhood areas. The Hamilton County, Kans. map was included to show the relative compactness of the neighbourhoods in a sparsely settled area, and to emphasize the fact that population cannot be divided by sparse lines to determine the actual distance between farm families. This map was made by the Extension Agent and local people, in connection with the setting up of an organization of neighbourhood leaders in 1932. The figures in the tabulated portion of the map indicate the number of open-country families in each neighbourhood area.